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Virginia Butler: Commitment, Service, and Mentoring at Portland State University, 1993–2020

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One day in the late 1990s, Dr. Virginia Butler invited me to join her and her husband Andrew for the Monster Cookie Metric Century, a 60-mile bike ride starting from the State Capitol building in Salem and winding through the Oregon countryside. Lean and fit, they both cycled long distances regularly. On the day of the event, I was scheduled to drive over to their house so they could load all three bikes on their red Subaru. That early fall morning, the weather looked about as wet as it gets in the Pacific Northwest. I called Virginia, and she talked me into coming over despite the gray. When I arrived, it was raining even harder. Both Virginia and I hesitated, but Andrew said we should at least drive down to Salem and see what the weather looked like there. We loaded the bikes and drove through the downpour. When we got to the parking lot in Salem, the unrelenting rain still fell. Andrew suggested that we should go find a nice place to have a hot breakfast. But I said, “Let’s at least bike the first mile and see how it goes.” With our episodic but well-timed optimism, the three of us made our way through the entire 60-mile ride, which included a roadside stop for enormous cookies along the way.

Virginia, my colleague for a quarter century at Portland State University (PSU), is undaunted by bad weather or hard work, and those qualities shine through in her academic life as well as her leisure time. A curriculum vitae (CV) is academia’s short-hand format for keeping track of accomplishments. Virginia’s CV is 23 pages

long. The CV lets one know the bare bones of her career, such as that Virginia came to PSU in 1993, with a Ph.D. from the University of Washington. She earned tenure in 2000 and was promoted to full professor in 2006. But a CV omits the adjectives. Let me provide a few.

Although many readers of this compilation doubtless know Virginia from her outstanding scholarship, she also performed a great deal of service to the Anthropology Department at PSU. Showing courageous leadership, she served as chair of the department for her last three years at PSU, 2017–2020. She advocated passionately for the university to hire another archaeologist to continue the strong tradition of that subfield in our program. She guided the department through challenges and adversity, including the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden pivot to remote learning in March 2020.

In a small department, faculty members share a great deal of work. Virginia was a collaborative colleague. She served on the yearly admissions committee and graduate review committee, engaged in annual assessment activities, and helped keep the curriculum up to date (Figure 1). She also added her visionary contributions to hiring committees and supported colleagues through their promotion and tenure process and their post-tenure reviews. She tended carefully to the department’s social interactions; she hosted many of our fall welcome-back parties at her beautiful home in northeast Portland. We all shed our shoes at the door and entered a



Figure 1. Virginia, second from right in facing row, at anthropology faculty teaching workshop with other faculty, Melanie Change, Charles Klein, Jeremy Spoon, and Mrinalani Thanka, ca. 2019 (Photo by Michele Gamburd).

well-cared-for, warm, bustling space filled with good food to meet friends new and old.

Virginia was widely respected across campus. For the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Virginia served on the college Curriculum Committee and on a search committee to choose a new dean in 2011. For the university, colleagues twice elected her to the Faculty Senate. She demonstrated her strong social networks while on the influential Senate Committee on Committees, which designates individuals to serve on other Constitutional committees. Virginia chaired the Task Force on Academic Quality, and she demonstrated compassionate yet fair decisions about degree requirements while on the Academic Requirements Committee. She also served at various times on the Graduate Council, the Library Committee,

and the Faculty Development Committee. The work of the university moves forward through this sort of exemplary engagement in shared governance.

When I was new to the Pacific Northwest, Virginia invited me to her home to watch an October baseball game, introduced me to Ichiro and the rest of the Seattle Mariners, and infused me with her love of the team. Virginia brought the same enthusiasm to her teaching. A virtuoso instructor, Virginia taught students from freshmen to graduate students. She won the coveted John Eliot Allen Teaching Award in three decades (1998, 2005, and 2012). She showed faith, perseverance, and personal investment in her graduate mentoring. She presented papers and posters at professional conferences and co-authored articles and book chapters with her students, creating a

rich network of archaeologists around the state and country. She served as chair to 17 students (with 3 more in process at the time of this writing). In addition, she served as a committee member for 27 additional graduate students in anthropology, 28 M.A. and Ph.D. committees in other departments, and 10 at other universities. She regularly contributed to high-impact practices for undergraduates, for example by mentoring three honors theses. In addition, as part of the Anthropology Department's contribution to the University Studies General Education Program, she taught a collaborative, interdisciplinary course for freshmen on the Columbia River Basin theme and coordinated at the junior level the Archaeology Cluster (since folded into a larger cluster, Interpreting the Past). She poured her heart into her relationships with her students (Figure 2).

Throughout her career, Virginia engaged in outreach to the community, exemplifying the spirit of PSU's motto "Let knowledge serve." She created the First Thursday Archaeology Lecture Series in 1997 and ran it for over 20 years, building community between local practitioners and PSU students. She also made over 70 presentations to the community and engaged in media outreach. Of particular significance was the inception of the Archaeology Roadshow in 2012. This event drew together natural and social scientists around issues of local archaeology (precontact, contact, and historical) and brought archaeology to life for thousands of visitors (Figure 3). Held during the first week of June, the Roadshow grew in size and scope year-by-year, adjoining the Portland State Farmers Market and drawing the curious shoppers to explore the wonders of the buried past. Virginia's efforts included envisioning the possibility, persevering to bring it to life, persuading others to join the endeavor, and bringing to bear the managerial capacity of the circus ringmaster to keep many plans and projects in motion over extended period of time, despite adversity and challenges.

Virginia is a respected and beloved colleague who welcomed me to this department when I first arrived in 1995, and whose wise counsel and steadfast presence I will miss greatly in the future. It is difficult to imagine our department without her passion, her precision, her optimism, and her energy. I wish her joy in all that comes next.



Figure 2. Virginia, third from left, with students (Photo by Michele Gamburd).



Figure 3. Virginia, center, at the 2017 Archaeology Roadshow with students (Photo by Michele Gamburd).